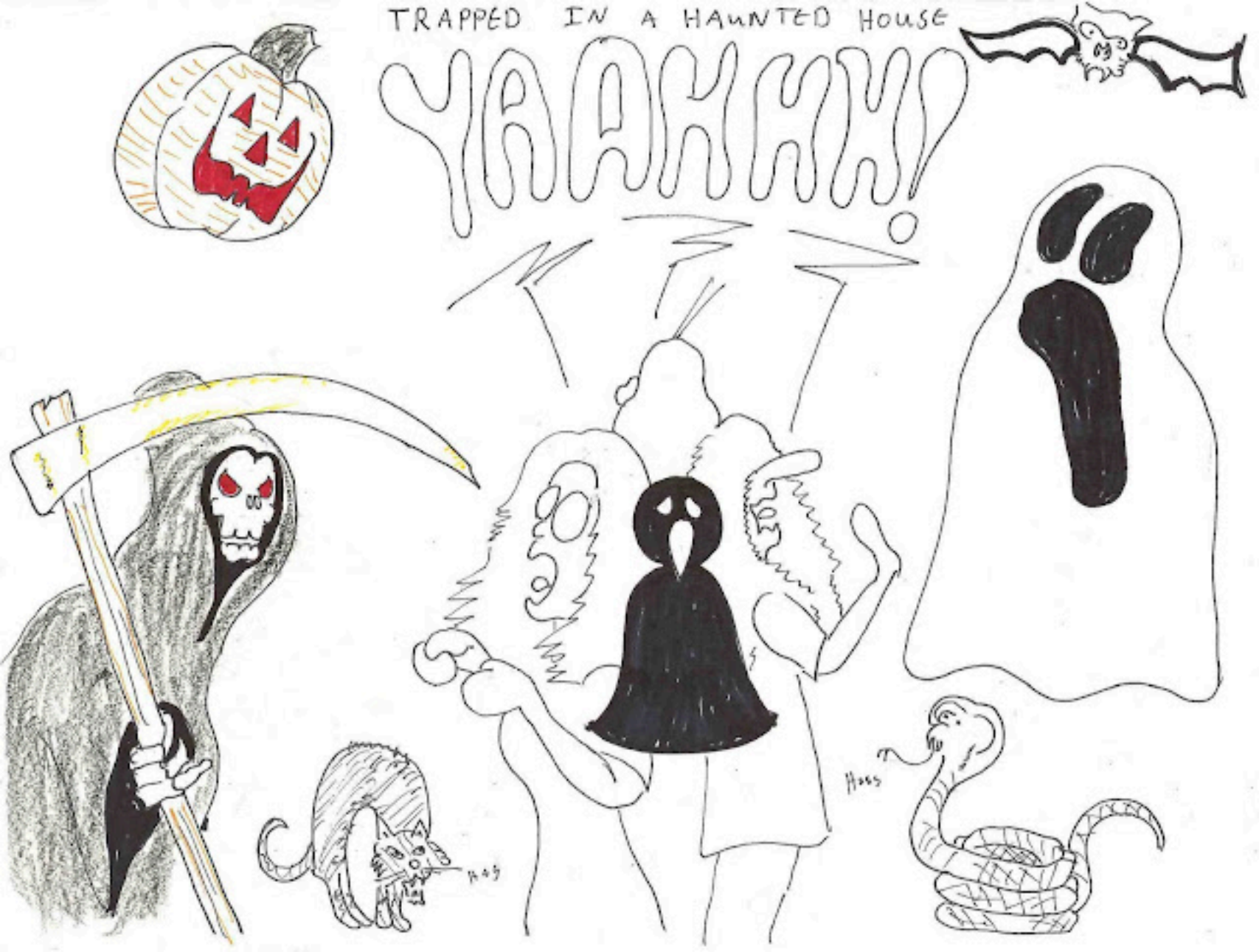
TRAPPED IN A HAUNTED HOUSE



Sasha ran a mental tally: *A shot of vodka has 65 calories. Lunch? That crap pasta must have had a butt-load. But I haven't had dinner yet, so...*

She tossed the vodka back with a whiplash motion, set the glass on the bar and motioned for another. While the 'tender shuffled over, she looked down at her lap. Under that stylish, blood-orange skirt, those thighs.... Those thighs were spreading.

"Good show tonight," the 'tender made conversation as he poured. "I like what you did with the recycled pumpkin story. I never knew you could drop 'em off at the zoo. Yeah, I called my sister and told her. She'll get everybody at-"

"-Thanks." Sasha cut him off abruptly. She swiveled around, showing the man her back. *Freakin' perv.* Pretending to study the bottle while he's really looking at her tits. *Pumpkins my ass.* She wouldn't even cast a shadow in this dive if it wasn't where everyone in the industry came to wet their beaks. Not that she needed the connections anymore - after twenty years she was well established as the face of NBC affiliate channel 12's local station - but old habits die hard. Besides, these were her people: the anchors, reporters, cameramen, meteorologists, sportscasters, and producers who brought you the news, live, every day, at 5, 6 and 10.

Oh, and don't forget the traffic gals. Those little tramps who can barely string two words together but stand in front of a big map during rush hour with wide, panicked eyes waiting for somebody to tell them how to pronounce a street name: "Uh. A car fire on.... Piss-on-it? Is that right?"

No, you slut. Bissonnette. It's French. Like the whores who gave my grandfather syphilis in World War II. Ask your grandma.

Sasha sipped the liquor now, smiling. Always nice to craft zingers after the fact, but that one wouldn't have passed anyway. The traffic gal who had started giving Sasha the stink-eye and spreading rumors how management was looking for "fresh" talent at the 5 o'clock seat was named Portugal.

Jennifer Portugal.

And with her long, straight black hair; dark, almond shaped eyes; smooth, mocha

complexion; and voluptuous curves; Jennifer Portugal's grandma would have been about as French as a bean fajita.

There - just thinking about the back-stabbing bitch caused another shot of vodka to disappear. Was it worth it to subject herself to the pop-eyed 'tender for another refill or should she put a cap on it? Go home, eat a fistful of raisins, and hit the sheets?

Suddenly, the decision was made for her:

"Hey now," Virgil Templeton called from the door. He started towards her, walking across the room with his pronounced limp. "Is that Sasha Monroe? And is she holding an empty glass?" He waved to the bartender and pointed at Sasha's head. When she turned around, the bottle was posed and waiting.

Virgil saddled up on the seat next to hers. His drink came - a whisky - and they touched glasses.

"Come on, man," Virgil motioned to the mounted television screen currently broadcasting an ESPN documentary. "Turn it to channel 12 and turn it up."

"No can do," the bartender said. "You know the rules. No preferential treatment to any local station. 11, 13, 9, hell, even 55 are here tonight."

"Fuck 'em." Virgil downed his whisky and received another. "None of 'em rate any higher than a kiddie clown show anyway."

The bartender moved away to service another drunk.

Virgil turned his attention to Sasha and smiled. "Hey beautiful," he said, leaning in for a kiss. She met his lips with hers and then gave him a taste of the vodka on her tongue. "I saw you on the 6 today," he said, wiping his mouth. "The camera loves you, but it always has."

Virgil was the station's senior live action camera man. A Vietnam vet, he was fearless, fast and sharp. His team always beat the competition to every breaking news story. Some of his camera work had become legend - racing through a burning building;

jumping in front of a fleeing car; smoking guns aimed right at the lens. They said he had standing offers with every national outfit, but he refused to leave Houston. Something to do with familial obligations, although the specifics were vague. Rumors of an institutionalized wife or disabled child made the rounds, but nobody really knew the truth. Virgil was remarkably tight-lipped about his personal life.

When Sasha first started out as a roving street reporter, she'd been given some good counsel to be friendly with the cameramen as they were the ones who could - depending upon how they treated her - make or break her entire career. In retrospect, she may have taken this advice a little too far - spreading herself like a communal rash over the station's camera crew - but twenty years later, seventeen of those as the top rated anchor woman in H-town, you couldn't argue with the dividends paid out by those early investments.

And, yes, Virgil had been such an investment. But, unlike the others, she continued to put into that account over the years. In fact, she still knocked on his door sometimes when she needed the ultimate stress relief. He had a decade or more years on her; his hair was long and gray and tied in a hippie ponytail that was embarrassingly passé; and he had physical and mental scars that Sasha didn't even want to know about; but for an older man, his body was remarkably trim and firm and he had the stamina of a cross-country train. Men half his age - hell, one-third his age - gave out faster.

Virgil went wherever he was needed, and he didn't stop until the job was done. Tossing him a "please keep me in focus" fuck when she'd first started at channel 12 had been one of the best decisions Sasha had made as a professional newscaster.

"Too bad we can't watch our station," Virgil said. "Shane is doing that haunted house thing over in Magnolia. They're breaking into regularly scheduled to show live bumpers."

Sasha wrinkled her nose. "Really? Just to show scantily clad millennials acting like assholes around those stupid fear factories? We've sunk that low, huh?"

Virgil shook his head. "No, not those haunted houses. The Settergast Home. In Magnolia? It's a real Haunted House. Shane's out there with Brian and Archer and a

group of 'paranormal investigators'." Virgil laughed. "Spooky shit. Good T.V. Going to do half an hour live at midnight."

"Played out old retread boring filler," Sasha groused.

Virgil put his hand on her knee, lifting her skirt, and slid it all the way up to the top of her thigh. His finger dug under the line of her panties. "I love it when you talk like a grumpy old man."

Sasha cleared her throat and drank.

"You sure you don't want to go watch?" Virgil said. "We can go to my place?"

"Maybe we should."

"Yeah."

Virgil tossed bills on the bar. "Besides," he said, taking Sasha's hand. "Portugal is with them. I know you wouldn't want to miss seeing her jumping up and down in that sexy witch costume, squealing with fright."

Sasha froze. "Jennifer is there? Dressed like a witch?"

"A *sexy* witch," Virgil corrected.

"Cleavage?"

Virgil nodded solemnly.

"How much?"

Virgil inspected Sasha's chest, decided, and gently placed the tip of his finger at point of her sternum.

"Oh that miserable bitch...." Sasha muttered. "Hey, how far away is Magnolia? Can you get me there before midnight?"

"Easy."

"Great. We gotta stop by my place first." Sasha flashed her deadliest smile. "I need to change into something more appropriate."

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Sexy witch, huh?

Working as long as she had in the confines of local news, Sasha had learned a thing or two about sexy. It's the conundrum of every female anchor working for an affiliate: they must use their sex to attract attention; but cannot be perceived as sexual creatures. At least, not at the main news desks. Weather, traffic, and the occasional sports girls could get away with murder. But the news desk anchor? She must present an alluring figure so any man - or woman, for that matter - channel surfing will pause to take a look. Now. How do you keep those eyes focused on you when you can't show skin or act silly?

The answer is class. Confidence. Squared shoulders and an engaged expression. They stop to notice the hourglass figure and round breasts but stay when your voice is clear and compelling. When your eyes look right at them - unwavering. When you smile and the room feels a little warmer for it.

Then there are those like Jennifer Portugal, Sasha considered, who had to be reminded by the assistant producer that she'd better buy another bra because, hey, we have to keep the temperature low in the studio, you know?

Class, skank, Sasha talked to Jennifer in her head. *Something your generation has lost*. She finished clasping a black velvet choker with a costume emerald inset around her long neck. *But don't worry, sweetie. I'll give you a lesson in it tonight.*

She turned away from the dressing mirror and presented herself to Virgil. Sitting on the bed, he looked up from the magazine. His eyes widened and his mouth formed an O.

"Holy mother of God," he said. "You sure that's legal?"

"Ha!" Sasha ran hands down her flanks, smoothing out the fabric of the black silk dress. Strictly speaking, it was more than legal - it would pass channel 12's professional code. It showed no flesh below the collar bone and no skin about the knee.

But, oh, the way it hugged her; the closeness to her skin. How light traveled over its obsidian surface, accentuating every curve.

And Ms. Portugal may very well believe that she was the definition of exotic, but Sasha Monroe's blood danced with gypsies. Hers was the *exotic* as imagined by Lucifer. When she set down with intent at a mirror, she could make her eyes, hair, lips and face call back to a time when men were truly beguiled by ethereal beauty.

Sexy witch? Child's play.

"So what are you supposed to be?" Virgil asked, placing his hands on her hips and looking up at her face.

"A vampire," she replied. "We'll need to stop for some of those fake teeth."

"I love it." Virgil moved his hands around and caressed her buttock, pulling her close.

Sasha was about to protest - she didn't want to get mussed up - when Virgil's cell phone shrieked. "Hell," he said, snatching it from its holster.

He stood up and paced the room while carrying on a conversation:

"Yeah?
"No, I'm at my apart-
"No, I haven't heard-
"Right, what's the gag?
"Wait. Wait. Wait wait wait. No shit? 911? For real?
"Shane wouldn't....
"No, I told you, I'm at my apartment.

"Look, I'm 90 seconds from the van. Feed it to me there."

Virgil killed the connection and arched an eyebrow at Sasha. "That was Kent. The Magnolia up-link just went dead and there was a 911 call from the Settergast home. Nobody can reach Shane or any of the crew.

"We won't have time to stop for teeth."

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Virgil drove and manipulated the technology in the news van at the same time with supernatural instinct. Doing 80 mph up Highway 249, he rarely set eyes on the road ahead, mostly focusing on the knobs, switches and buttons of the computers set around the dashboard. Even still, he swerved and maneuvered through traffic without once tapping on the brakes.

This reckless behavior didn't bother Sasha in the least. She trusted Virgil implicitly.

"Something with the equipment?" Sasha offered an opinion. "A breakdown?"

They were watching footage from the Magnolia shoot on the dash monitor. A grainy, black and white image of some people standing around a keil-lit yard, flanked by grasping post oak trees, a dark house looming in the background. Suddenly there is a flash and noise and everything goes static.

"No," Virgil cued it up again. "Wouldn't happen like that. There are too many fail-safes. No tech problem could make it just drop. Listen."

The scene played out again. Audio was bad, but you could hear human voices. Virgil tweaked some knobs, and the voices came in louder, clearer:

"What was...?"

"I can't get.... I can't...."

"Did you? Hey, Shane! Hey!"

And then an inhuman, guttural snarl immediately followed by a multitude of terrified screams before everything went snow.

Virgil drove in silence. Sasha tried again, "A joke, then. Like you said. Good T.V.?"

Virgil shook his head. "No. Shane's not answering; not even his personal cell phone. And the 911 call. That's not a joke."

The van picked up speed.

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Red and blue flashing lights from the police car against the stone facade of the Settergast home turned the scene surreal. The house looked alternately large when exploding in shocking red; then smaller when bathed in blue. Virgil stopped the van before entering the turn-a-round that would lead them to the front door. The police car twenty yards away; another Channel 12 action van parked next to it.

"Virgil?" Sasha said. She looked at the station's senior live action camera man and saw something on his face she'd never seen there before in their twenty-year history together.

Fear.

"Virgil?"

"Where are the cops?" he asked.

The police car was empty, both driver and passengers' side doors wide open. Nobody was in the yard, nobody on the porch of the house.

There were no people anywhere.

"Inside, probably," Sasha replied. She opened the door and Virgil grabbed her arm.

"Virgil!" she exclaimed. "What the hell? Come on."

"No, don't - " but he was too late. She'd already shrugged him off and left the vehicle. Virgil scrambled after her.

Sasha stopped at the front of the van and looked around. Aside from the click of the cruiser's strobe lights turning, the night was completely still. Not a sound, not a movement. Sasha hugged her bare arms against the chill.

Virgil stood next to her. "This ain't right."

"Yeah," Sasha whispered. "Go get a camera."

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"Light me up," Sasha ordered. She was on the Settergast porch, at the front door, microphone in hand. Virgil stood in front of her with a shoulder mounted camera that was pointed at the ground. Despite himself, he took a few steps back until his eyes framed the news-anchor between the elaborately stenciled lead-framed side windows and the ornately carved wooden beams of the overhang. Maybe sweep down from one of the houses peaked gables then the wide shot of the facade before zooming in on Sasha's beautiful face.

"Fuck this," Virgil snapped, realizing he was committed. He heaved the camera onto his shoulder and hit the spot. Sasha held a hand up, momentarily blinded by the light, and then gave a nod.

"Whenever you're ready," she said.

Virgil raised his hand high then lowered it.

"This is Sasha Monroe reporting from the Settergast house in Montgomery, Texas. Earlier tonight, Channel 12 sent a news crew here to investigate the rumors of hauntings for a Halloween special. Approximately half an hour ago, the live feed from that event was disrupted and an emergency call was placed to this location. My camera man and I arrived just a few moments ago to find an abandoned police

vehicle and no signs of life. We are now going to enter the house to see if we can discover what has happened to our coworkers and the police who responded to their call for help. This is not a hoax."

Sasha turned on her heels, reached for the knob, but before she could touch it, the door flew open and smashed against the interior wall with a force that made her jump.

"HO!" she cried. "Did you get that?"

Virgil didn't respond - but then, he wouldn't. A cameraman should never be seen or heard.

"Okay," Sasha steadied herself. "Okay. Come closer, get the light in here."

The house was dark. Virgil adjusted the camera's spotlight to present a wider beam, illuminating more of the floor so Sasha could see where she was walking.

"Stay with me," she said and stepped through the doorway.

"We are now inside the Settergast house," Sasha reported as she moved slowly through the foyer. "I can tell you that the atmosphere here is one of -"

A loud crashing sound from somewhere deep inside made Sasha scream, "Goddamit!"

"Ah, fuck!" she turned to Virgil. "What's our delay? Am I fucked? Shit."

Virgil turned off the camera and spoke. "Ten seconds. They'll catch it at the studio."

"Camera's off now, right? Okay. Okay okay okay," Sasha lifted herself up on her toes a few times, smoothed out the front of her dress, and then said, "Fuck shit fucking hell fucking shit shit *motherFUCK*! Get that shit out of my system NOW!"

"We good?" Virgil asked.

"Yeah. Except what the *FUCK* was that?"

"I'm more than willing to turn around and leave right now, Sasha. I'm only here for you."

Sasha placed her hands on her knees, bent forward, and blew wind. She stood up and spoke. "No. Turn the camera back on. Wait. How do I look?" She wiped her upper lip. "Any snot hanging out? How's my hair?"

"You're fine."

"You'll take care of me, right?"

"I always make you look good, honey. You know that."

Sasha smiled bravely and nodded. Virgil turned the camera on and gave her the high sign.

"We just heard something from inside the house," Sasha spoke to the lens. "We're going to investigate."

She turned, and Virgil followed. There were two rooms off each side of the foyer. A quick sweep with the spotlight found them both empty. Virgil checked the switches - nothing. No electricity at all.

A dark hallway loomed ahead. The camera's spot wasn't powerful enough to illuminate the entire length, only the first few feet of the walls before all light was swallowed.

"We're going to check down this hallway," Sasha continued, her voice strained and tense. "The interior of the house is very dark. It is difficult to see where I'm...."

Sasha stopped. She caused a sticky, sucking sound by lifting her foot. When she inhaled, she almost gagged from a terrible stench.

"Virgil," she whispered. "Point the light at the floor. Virgil?"

When the light didn't move and she received no response, Sasha turned around to face the camera.

"Virgil?"

The camera's spotlight remained steady and focused at her head. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the hot spot. Now she could make out the bulk of the machine along with smaller read and green lights indicating the device was on and running.

But there was no shape behind the camera. Only an impossible nothingness where the body - Virgil's body - should be.

The camera was floating in midair.

At the realization of this, Sasha gasped, and the camera immediately fell to the ground. The light broke with a loud popping sound, and the hallway was cast into total darkness.

From ahead and behind, at the entry and exit of the hall, graveyard voices began to laugh softly as they approached. Sasha whimpered, frantically spinning around to try and find some point of reference in the absolute void.

Her foot slipped in a viscous liquid, and she went to one knee. A palm slapped against the floor and came up sticky and reeking of blood.

"You're fine," one of the gathering voices hissed.

"We'll take care of you," a different voice came from behind.

"We'll make you look good," this one very close now. Sasha lashed out but hit nothing.

"So good!" exploded in her ear.

Sasha screamed.

Happy Halloween!